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ABSTRACT

Despite the continued lack of adequate professional preparation of secondary teachers in reading, there are steps which the secondary classroom content-area teacher can take to improve the reading ability of his students. The first thing the teacher must do is determine the specific reading and study skills required by students for content learning. This establishing of goals takes place before instruction begins. The next step is to determine the extent to which students possess these skills. When students' reading status has been assessed and their particular skills deficiencies determined, the teacher should gather reading materials which represent the range of reading abilities found in the classroom and provide practice in particular areas of weakness. The teacher must then decide upon patterns of classroom organization to maximize teaching effectiveness. The most obvious organizational pattern is to group students by their determined reading levels and to teach content using material written at the appropriate level of difficulty. Finally, the teacher should use a functional approach to evaluate students' growth in reading and study skills. (WR)

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"A Classroom Reading Program"

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A Classroom Reading Program

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Successful secondary developmental reading instruction must be centered in the content-area classroom. This is where learning in the secondary curriculum takes place. Therefore, the question is what can the secondary content-area teacher do to improve reading in his classroom?

Despite the obvious need for teacher expertise in order to effect successful secondary reading instruction, the weakness of secondary teachers' preservice preparation in reading has become almost a cliche. During the 1960's, a number of studies pointed to this weakness (2, 4, 11, 13), and the current scene appears to be no brighter. In 1973, Estes and Piercey (6) reported a survey of state certification agencies in the United States which showed that only nine states required preservice education in reading for the certification of secondary teachers. In the same year, Harker (8) reported that only fifty-four

percent of Canadian teacher-education institutions offering programs in secondary education provided courses in secondary developmental reading, and in only one institution was this course a program requirement.

Given the present status of teacher preservice preparation for reading instruction it is clear that if developmental reading is to be integrated with the teaching of content in the secondary grades, many teachers will have to teach reading with little or no preparation to do so. For this reason, it is not surprising to find a recent article entitled, "Becoming a Reading Teacher--On Short Notice," (5) in which the author describes the plight of the unprepared secondary content-area teacher who finds himself unexpectedly confronted with the task of improving reading in his classroom. The question therefore becomes, what can the often ill-prepared secondary content-area teacher do in order to meet the reading and study needs of his students? This paper is concerned with delineating a sequence of steps which the teacher can take, given the resources of the conventional teaching situation. These steps can be implemented within the framework of a school-wide developmental reading program, or in the circumstance where a single teacher or group of teachers wants to initiate reading instruction in the classroom.

Determining Skills

The first step for the teacher is to determine the specific reading and study skills required by students for content learning. This takes place before instruction begins. Here the teacher tries to place himself in the position of his students, taking into account their previous content learning, their general experiential background,

their expected level of content mastery, etc. He analyzes the content learning tasks which will confront his students and asks himself what specific reading and study skills his students will need in order to learn this content. By this exercise, the sequence of understandings which students are expected to achieve will become clear. And more important, the reading and study skills necessary to achieve these understandings and the appropriate sequence for teaching them will also become clear.

Determining Status

Once the teacher has established the reading and study skills necessary for successful student learning in his particular content area, the next step is to determine the extent to which students possess these skills.

Marksheffel (10) has estimated that the range of reading ability encountered in the normal secondary content-area classroom is between six and nine grade levels. To determine the range in his particular classroom the teacher may resort to standardized group reading achievement tests. Two limitations are apparent in the use of these tests in the content-area classroom, however. The first is that they tend to place students at their frustration level in reading rather than at their instructional level (3, 14). The second limitation is that these tests give a measure of general reading ability rather than specific reading ability in particular content material. Research has consistently shown that reading achievement is to a considerable degree specific to particular content material, especially at higher levels of understanding (1, 9, 15).

Because of these limitations, it is usually more appropriate to use teacher-made informal group tests based on the actual content-area reading material used in the classroom. These tests can be designed to require students to demonstrate their level of proficiency in the performance of the specific reading and study skills which the teacher has determined to be necessary for content learning. In this way, these tests serve a diagnostic function in that they can isolate particular strengths and weaknesses in the skills which students will require for content learning. For example, a science teacher may determine that the learning demanded of students in a unit of his course requires the ability to understand data presented graphically. The obvious step to take before students read this material is to determine whether they can in fact read graphs successfully. If they can, they are ready to undertake the content-learning task. If they cannot, the teacher will know that instruction in graphs is required if his students are to be expected to learn the content.

Selecting Materials

When students' reading status has been assessed and their particular skills deficiencies determined, the next step is to gather reading materials which represent the range of reading abilities found in the classroom and which provide practice in particular areas of weakness. Since one textbook seldom answers all these needs, students will be better served if a wide variety of content reading material is provided. The teacher's ultimate objective is to teach content; the textual material through which content is learned is the means to this end.

In gathering material, the total resources of the school and the community can be drawn upon. Sources of alternate reading material

containing information pertinent to the teacher's content-area teaching objectives can include materials collected by other teachers, the school library, clipped magazine and newspaper material, supplementary texts, complementary material solicited from industry and community agencies, and class projects completed by students in previous years. Two readability formulas (7, 12) have been recently devised by which the teacher can quickly determine the general reading difficulty of these materials. No disservice will be done to students if the teacher selects alternate material to the textbook, provided that this material contains information relevant to students' content learning.

Classroom Organization

Once student needs have been determined and appropriate materials have been gathered, the teacher must decide upon patterns of classroom organization to maximize teaching effectiveness. The most obvious organizational pattern is to group students in terms of their determined reading levels and to teach content using material written at the appropriate level of reading difficulty. Certainly this is an improvement over the one-textbook-for-all-students approach, and in some circumstances this pattern of organization can be effective. But this approach tends to freeze students at their existing reading levels while preventing them from learning to read and study content material at higher reading levels. When used exclusively, this approach can be as damaging to students' self-concept and motivation as constantly expecting them to learn from reading material at their frustration level. Alternate organizational patterns should be evolved which, while furthering students' content learning, also provide the teacher with opportunities to develop students' reading and study skills. These

organizational patterns can involve grouping for specific needed skills development, interest grouping, social grouping, grouping for research projects, team grouping, and, occasionally, arbitrary heterogeneous grouping. It is important to realize that these different patterns can operate in the same classroom over the same extended time period. On a day-to-day basis, the teacher will implement the organizational pattern which best accommodates the specific demands placed on students by different content-area reading-learning situations.

Evaluation

The success of a classroom reading program will be determined by the degree to which students learn content from reading. This is a functional approach to evaluation. The measurement of student growth in reading and study skills will be meaningless if done in isolation from the content-area learning situations in which these skills are applied. Evaluation may employ teacher-made tests such as were described for use in the initial determination of student reading status. But an experienced content-area teacher has an additional tool at his disposal--direct observation. Very often the most perceptive assessments of students' progress can be made in this manner. This informal, on-going evaluation will be based on the day-do-day observation of students' success with reading and reading-related assignments. Throughout this process, students' initial reading status will be kept in mind as the base line from which progress can be determined. According to the degree of success students demonstrate, subsequent assignments will be varied in difficulty and complexity. In this manner, the process of evaluation becomes integrated with the process of teaching as each process informs the other.

A less direct method of evaluating students' achievement in content-area reading is their performance on content-area tests. To the extent that the content-area learning measured by these tests results from reading, these tests will measure students' reading achievement as well as their content-area learning. This method will be particularly revealing when students' previous success in content-area learning has been inhibited by reading difficulties. In this context, one hardly need point out the absurdity of measuring students' mastery of content material by means of tests which demand a higher reading level than students have reached or than they have been required to use in the classroom learning situation. Here there is an obvious need for the differential evaluation of content learning using tests adjusted to students' various reading levels.

Conclusion

Despite the continued lack of adequate professional preparation of secondary teachers in reading, there are steps which the secondary classroom content-area teacher can take in order to improve the reading of his students. The steps outlined here provide only the most general guidelines to teachers in different content areas. Ultimately, the content-area teacher is the reading expert. He is the person best able to determine the specialized reading and study skills necessary for successful student learning in his area. What is needed for the general implementation of reading in the secondary grades is that secondary teachers overcome their traditional reticence to teach the reading and study skills which pertain to learning in their respective content areas. A great deal of discussion has taken place over the years concerning the need for comprehensive

secondary reading programs. The success or failure of such programs will be determined by the extent to which every secondary content-area teacher undertakes his own classroom reading program.

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